Introduction

As we have discussed in previous annual reports, the English Department continues to respond collectively to student writing as part of our on-going program review strategy. This practice of routinely setting aside segments of regular department meetings allows for on-going assessment of student success while also addressing the more pointed goals of our Program Review commitments.

This report documents our progress since our special report to the Program Review Committee in January 2006.

Program Goal For This Reporting Period

Goal: Develop a departmental set of descriptive criteria for papers at each letter-grade level in English 6 for distribution and discussion in all English 6 classes. When distributed, the descriptive criteria should help students in English 6 cultivate a clear sense of the qualities of essays at each letter-grade level so that students might more effectively improve their writing.

This goal is one that we raised in our 2004-2005 Program Review Report (“New Departmental Program Review Strategy”), but at that point had only met once to begin. We had drafted descriptive criteria for a “D” level paper, but had not discussed criteria for other grade levels.

We decided to carry forward our assessment of student writing with a focus this year on assessing student writing for Studies in Literature (English 6). In addition to helping us refine our assessment strategies in ways described below, this focus on English 6 also brought the English Department into alignment with the current college-wide focus on program review of the General Education program.

Strategies for Accomplishing Goal

Strategy: Meet to discuss and develop a departmental rubric, or descriptive criteria, for papers at each letter grade. We will then distribute and discuss this rubric in all English 6 classes. (Stated in our 2004-2005 report).

We met at a series of department meetings. These sessions drew on experiences in our 2004-2005 paper grading sessions, and allowed us to work with more refined strategies. Our focus on English 6 allowed us to enter into more detailed assessment of student writing by drawing on student work from a course that all members of the department teach, as well as to assess essays at a consistent point in the students’ career at Westmont (always at the level of general education in literature). Working with English 6 essays, then, refined our assessment strategies and helped us to reach conclusions about student writing in ways that had been difficult in past collective grading sessions when we were working with more variables in student essays.

Data
As a basis for completing the descriptive criteria, we met three times during department meetings in 2005-2006: November 2005, 17 January 2006, 25 February 2006. At these sessions, we collectively responded to a total of five student essays. (See English Department Assessment File on the Department’s Share Drive for minutes from these meetings and copies of student papers.) At each of these sessions, we responded to at least one student paper, and discussed what qualities we noticed that made the student essay reflective of the grade each faculty member would have assigned to it. All identifying information from the student and all of the instructor’s comments were removed before essays were distributed. Before we discussed any essay, faculty members independently wrote down the grade they would assign to each student essay.

The department secretary kept detailed minutes of these meetings, recording the conversation for future reflection on departmental criteria for student success or failure.

We also consulted descriptive criteria or rubrics from Santa Barbara City College and from The University of Texas (a nationally-ranked writing program) for samples of rubrics used in teaching writing to first-year students at other institutions. In addition, two faculty members contributed descriptive criteria they had used in past courses.

**Interpretation of the Data**

We chose to focus on one course and to work with more essays than we used in our 2004-2005 collective paper reading sessions in order to correct for the sense we developed in those sessions that the sample student work we were assessing involved too many variables. Though that paper set seemed to meet WASC criteria for good evidence (*Evidence Guide*, 91-12), department members felt it was too small to provide definitive support for conclusions about student success that the department hoped for. The paper set we amassed over 2005-2006 was both more representative and more actionable than our past paper set.

Because we continually returned to student essays for English 6, several refrains began to emerge in our discussion. Through those repeated points, we were able to address some of the concerns we raised about the use of a “rubric” to teach writing in Westmont’s English Department. For instance, we repeatedly acknowledged that one factor in an essay’s success was a student’s ability to respond to previous feedback. Twice, two individual faculty members found themselves assigning divergent grades to an essay, without the context of when in the semester an essay was assigned, or what features of the essay an assignment had stressed. Our conversations made clear that we brought different expectations about what had been asked of the student, or how much training in specific mechanical issues or practices of literary analysis the student might have received before writing the essay. When our expectations were aligned through conversations, our grades were also more often aligned. From this conversation we realized the need to articulate to students the importance of addressing the particular details of any writing task and of taking responsibility for responding to cumulative feedback over the course of a semester.

These comments lead us to a heightened awareness that the residential liberal arts environment at Westmont allows for teaching writing in conversation with students, and that any descriptive criteria we developed needed to address the teaching environment we have. Theories of writing pedagogy widely acknowledge that one-on-one teaching produces the strongest student writers, as does regular feedback from peers and faculty. We clearly needed descriptive criteria that stressed to students their responsibility in taking advantage of those opportunities that Westmont’s residential community provides. We agreed that framing the criteria for students would be an important strategy in calling them to that responsibility.
These conversations provided ample material for completing the descriptive criteria for each letter grade.

Without a doubt, these sessions fulfilled our hope that collective paper reading would “bring to light more best teaching practices and the possibility of sharing solutions to address the inevitable frustrations of teaching writing” (2004-2005 Report, 3). For instance, we named as successful teaching strategies both sharing an exemplary paper with students at the beginning of the semester and having a pointed conversation with students about the variety of ways to earn a “B” to help them understand how their writing could improve in several ways, but still not result in a drastic grade improvement.

Using the Results

Appendix A to this report is the “Descriptive Criteria for Essays in English 6.” This handout incorporates information from the conversations we had in meetings, reflection on the minutes of those meetings, and department-wide response over email to an earlier draft of the criteria. We are confident that these criteria reflect, as well as possible, departmental consensus on student writing at each letter-grade level in English 6. The criteria also incorporate the learning goals for English majors stated in earlier reports during this five-year cycle of program review (in the examples of “Christian intellectual virtues” listed in the description of an “A” paper). The handout is two pages (to be reproduced double-sided) to allow for the “framing comments” department members mentioned in discussion.

As we noted in our last report, these conversations about student writing also continue to encourage us in teaching our students, and to allow us to share our most successful pedagogical strategies for responding to student writing. As a result, the English Department will continue to hold at least one collective evaluation session each semester during a department meeting. We will maintain this habit of collective grading even as we move on to engaging in and reporting on other aspects of program review.

Next Steps in Program Review

During the 2006-2007 academic year, faculty will distribute the descriptive criteria in all English 6 classes. In at least three classes (Prof. Delaney, Prof. Cook and Prof. Vandermey), before students see the criteria, they will be asked to write a brief assignment in which they describe the qualities of essays at three representative grade levels. Faculty will forward those student responses to the department secretary, who will collect them in the department’s assessment file. Those same students will be asked again to describe the qualities of essays at three representative grade levels after they have worked with the descriptive criteria for the semester. This comparison will allow us to gauge whether or not the use of the descriptive criteria effectively reinforces students’ ability to articulate the qualities of a successful paper, and by implication, the skills they should focus on to improve their writing.

The department has already begun to look ahead to program review plans for our next five-year cycle. Beginning with Fall 2007, we will collaborate with departments of Off-Campus Programs and the Modern Languages to focus on assessing students’ study-abroad experiences, particularly England Semester. The Director of Off-Campus Programs will join England Semester for approximately one week this fall to prepare him to provide feedback on effective assessment strategies for England Semester.
Appendix A

Criteria for Writing about Literature
Westmont College--English 6

The syllabi for Studies in Literature, and for other courses that fulfill the Reading Imaginatively requirement for Westmont’s General Education, point out that these courses will focus on writing, and on improving the students’ ability to write about literature. Specifically, the English Department faculty agree that in General Education, writing-intensive, literature courses, you should be required to write to “express yourself clearly, cogently, and grammatically; to develop the ability to distinguish information from opinion; to marshal evidence in support of points you wish to make; to disagree with others without expressing disrespect and to agree with others without plagiarizing their views; to structure your presentation of ideas in ways that prove persuasive; and to use words skillfully, craft sentences forcefully, and develop paragraphs robustly.”

Writing, though, never happens in a vacuum. Nor does the teaching of writing. Different writers usefully take a variety of paths to achieving the writing skills that faculty expect of students by the time they finish Studies in Literature, and different instructors will emphasize different aspects of developing those skills at various points in the semester. Yet all English Department faculty want students to reach this same goal of writing energetic, thoughtful, engaged essays about literature, and to have at least some glimpse of how such writing helps all of us become the kind of educated, faithful, lively Christians the college hopes for in its graduates.

The English Department faculty teach writing through conversation. A part of that conversation happens in providing written feedback on papers. It also happens in class discussion on days faculty make assignments and when they return essays. The conversation can happen at its best when students come to office hours with a draft of an essay before the final paper is due. In other words, students have some responsibility for participating in an effective conversation that happens over the course of the semester to improve their writing. Listening well, asking questions about writing, and taking ownership of the opportunities to improve as a writer and a reader enhance the conversation.

The criteria for letter grades on the reverse side of this handout assume that students learn to write at Westmont in conversation with faculty and with each other. Notice that how well a writer responds to previous feedback plays a part in each letter grade. If you’re not sure what you need to do to improve your writing, ask.
Finally, though they express ideas, papers are material objects, not ideals. The descriptions for each letter grade reflect an ideal paper. Real papers often contain some elements of papers from several grade levels. For instance, a “B” paper may “use vigorous language [that] pleases readers” (a quality of an “A” paper), while also offering “no stimulating insight into the work it discusses” (a mark of a “C” paper).
Criteria for Evaluating Literature Papers

**A paper**: An excellent paper that holds the reader’s interest while helping them gain new insights into the text. The paper conveys a strong sense of the writer’s original purpose, moving deftly from observations about the text on to why those observations matter to a reader’s understanding of the text. The paper demonstrates intellectual virtues of a Christian reader (for example, an understanding of the implications of multiple points of view, an adept awareness of scriptural allusion, a mature capacity for imaginative sympathy). The writer seems always to keep in mind a lively, literate audience (like a group of Eng 6 students) with some knowledge of the text. Those readers can easily understand how the writer reaches his or her conclusions about the text. The writer keeps the scope of the paper narrow enough to analyze the text with rich detail and works textual details into the essay with artfully incorporated quotations. The writer supports generalizations effectively, using vivid examples, quoting and explaining the text masterfully, paraphrasing when useful and avoiding summary. The paper is well organized with elegant transitions. The essay serves readers sentences to savor, with powerful verbs. The writer has taken some risks, gotten away from formulas in writing and gone well beyond standard interpretations of the text and in-class discussions. The paper fully addresses all of the requirements of the assignment and all previous feedback on writing.

**B paper**: A good paper that more than meets the assignment. The paper has a sense of purpose, though the writer may not always perceptively connect what the writer observes to why that observation matters. The paper suggests that the writer is acquiring the intellectual virtues of a Christian reader. The paper shows a strong sense of writing to an interested audience with a desire for a deeper appreciation of the chosen text. The scope of the paper is narrow enough for the writer to treat it adequately. The reader may not always be able to follow the writer step-by-step through the analysis of the text. The writer supports generalizations and uses specific examples from the text, avoiding summary and quoting correctly, if not always artfully. Language is sometimes colorful or imaginative. The paper shows attention to all of the parameters of the assignment and effectively employs some previous feedback on writing.

**C paper**: A satisfactory paper that makes a routine response to the assignment. It makes a commitment to the reader and attempts to meet that commitment, but offers no stimulating insight into the work it discusses. This paper may simply restate the class discussion of the text or contain lengthy summary. It shows some sense of literate audience and has a purpose. It is adequately organized so that the reader can follow it. The writer has supported generalizations with specific illustrations from the text or life (when appropriate), although he or she may not always use the text precisely, analyze it adequately or quote it effectively. There are few distracting errors in usage, punctuation or spelling. The writer has generally used language correctly. The paper addresses most of the requirements of the assignment and attempts to incorporate previous written or oral feedback on writing.

**D paper**: A below standard paper. The content is largely unsupported generalizations about the text or summary, or may be based on a misreading of the text. It shows no attempt to participate in a conversation with literate readers hoping to develop Christian intellectual virtues. Points are inadequately developed and sometimes erroneous, and there are few specifics or concrete examples from the text or relevant illustrations from the writer’s own world. The paper is poorly organized and difficult to follow. Errors in usage and punctuation occur frequently enough to distract the reader, hinder meaning or damage the writer’s credibility. The writer uses language inaccurately. Quotations are not incorporated correctly. The paper does not meet the requirements stipulated in the assignment and gives no attention to previous written or oral feedback on writing.
F paper: The writer shows little or no understanding of the assigned literature. It is poorly organized with ideas jumbled together so that it is difficult to follow. The points it makes are primarily generalizations and summaries, not shedding any new light on the text and not adequately supported with specific examples, details or explanations. Serious grammatical errors and problems in punctuation and usage mar the paper. The writer uses language inaccurately. The paper shows no awareness of the requirements for the assignment and does not acknowledge previous feedback. The writer may have committed plagiarism.